

Original citation:

Löfflmann, Georg. (2016) The pivot between containment, engagement, and restraint : President Obama's conflicted grand strategy in Asia. *Asian Security*, 12 (2). pp. 92-110.

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Publisher's statement:

"This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis *Asian Security* on 30/06/2016 available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14799855.2016.1190338>

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The Pivot between Containment, Engagement and Restraint – President Obama’s conflicted Grand Strategy in Asia.

Abstract: This article examines the formulation and implementation of American grand strategy under the Obama administration, and how the ‘pivot to Asia’ functions within this strategic context. It argues that President Obama attempts to secure continued American hegemony through a combination of cooperative engagement and restraint. This exposes a fundamental dilemma at the heart of America’s rebalancing: Increased engagement with U.S. allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific is fueling political, economic and military competition with China. Sequestration and questions over American strategic coherence and consistency are simultaneously undermining the credibility of the pivot, both at home and abroad. The article concludes that this dilemma makes it unlikely for the pivot to succeed in its stated aims, unless the United States re-emphasizes cooperative engagement with China.

The foreign and security policy of the Obama administration has provoked a continuous debate in policy circles, popular media and IR scholarship over the character of the ‘Obama Doctrine,’ and the course of American grand strategy.¹ At the heart of this debate lies the question if President Obama continues to pursue an established strategic course of ‘deep

engagement’ and ‘liberal hegemony’ for the United States, of if he has initiated a profound shift in U.S. foreign and security policy towards a position of military restraint and geopolitical retrenchment.² Predominantly, the rebalancing of the United States to the Asia-Pacific, and in particular the military component of the ‘pivot’, have been viewed as confirmation for the former position, as geostrategic shift designed to reaffirm American primacy in the region against the challenge of a rising China.³ Contradictory voices have characterized the pivot as mere ‘rhetoric’ without a serious commitment to underwrite America’s leadership role in the Asia-Pacific, while others have framed it as counterproductive attempt to contain China.⁴

Even observers that have conceded that Obama’s foreign and security policy carries elements of a realist ‘offshore balancing’ strategy however, tend to frame the pivot in contrast to his focus on restraint. Here, Obama is seen as pursuing a grand strategy of selective engagement, designed to ‘safeguard continued preponderance in the Asia-Pacific.’⁵ This article suggests that a critical analysis of the discursive construction and practical impact of American grand strategy under the Obama presidency reveals a more complex and contradictory picture of the Asian pivot that questions the coherence and consistency of the rebalancing in both ideational and practical terms. First, the article will demonstrate how the ‘Obama Doctrine’ attempts to

reconfigure America's global leadership role through 'burden sharing' and greater military restraint. Here, President Obama has frequently invoked the rhetoric of American primacy while pursuing practical measures more in line with strategic options of cooperative engagement and realist offshore balancing.

It will then examine in detail the diplomatic, economic and military measures undertaken since the announcement of the pivot and how these practical initiatives served the stated strategic objectives: maintaining security and stability in the region; strengthening existing alliances; developing new partnerships; and engaging China as a 'responsible stakeholder.' Here, the analysis suggests that increased cooperative engagement with U.S. allies and partners in the region has in turn fueled Chinese fears of American containment, resulting in geopolitical and geo-economic counter-measures aimed against U.S. hegemony in the region.

Finally, the article will consider the issue of the credibility of the pivot, both in the United States and abroad. Here, the focus lies on the fiscal effects of budget sequestration on U.S. defense policy, the domestic impact of American politics on the rebalancing, and how America's enduring global commitments affect its ability to concentrate strategically on the Asia-Pacific. The article concludes that the strategic dilemma at the heart of the rebalancing

results from the competing impulses of hegemony, engagement and restraint prevalent in U.S. foreign and security policy. While this basic tension is unlikely to be fully resolved, seeking greater cooperative engagement with China could address some of the imbalances that have accompanied the pivot since its inception.

President Obama and American grand strategy: Sustaining American leadership through engagement and restraint

A grand strategy is supposed to provide orientation about a country's role in the world, and to dedicate the nation's power and material resources toward achieving the goals the strategy sets out.⁶ American grand strategy should answer fundamental questions about 'America's core national interest' and 'the purpose of American power,' according to the influential Center for a New American Security (CNAS) think tank.⁷ The principle goals of U.S. national security policy are oriented at maintaining and promoting a liberal international order that was formed 'under American stewardship' following World War II.⁸ As the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has stated in its 2014 Quadrennial Defense Report (QDR):

The United States exercises global leadership in support of our interests: U.S. security and that of our allies and partners; a strong economy in an open economic system; respect for universal values; and an international order that promotes peace, security,

and opportunity through cooperation.⁹

These goals are thus fairly consistent and stable over time, and neither of these strategic objectives is particularly novel, or controversial among the majority of the foreign policy establishment in the United States.¹⁰ Crucially, the ability to act as a ‘benevolent hegemon’ and provide global leadership is seen as depending on the military preeminence of the United States, and its ability for global power projection and command of the ‘global commons’ of sea, air, and outer space (and now cyber space).¹¹ However, it is the way the United States envisions how to bring about this vision of *Pax Americana* that reveals the actual character of American grand strategy.

Under President Obama, expansive liberal-internationalist goals are frequently paired up with limited means and realpolitik considerations, producing a strategic mismatch between stated geopolitical ambitions and the actual involvement of American engagement. This conflicted stance of U.S. foreign and security policy has been on display in the ‘leading from behind’ intervention in Libya, the caveated response against ISIS, allowing for air strikes but not ‘boots on the ground,’ and the handling of the Ukraine crisis, where the United States took a diplomatic backseat behind Germany’s negotiations with Russia.¹²

The themes of engagement and restraint have been reiterated numerous times by the Obama administration: from the Pentagon's 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review* and 2012 *Defense Strategic Guidance* (DSG); to the declaration of the 'Obama Doctrine' at West Point; or the President's remark that U.S. policy should primarily avoid doing 'stupid stuff.'¹³ The articulation of American grand strategy at the highest level has been concerned with both sharing and limiting the economic and military costs of America's global leadership role.

The 2010 QDR, for example, stated that: "(...) the United States will remain the most powerful actor but must increasingly work with key allies and partners if it is to sustain stability and peace."¹⁴ The 2012 DSG linked continued efforts to work with U.S. allies and partners to a more cooperative vision of American hegemony: "Building partnership capacity elsewhere in the world also remains important for sharing the costs and responsibilities of global leadership."¹⁵ American grand strategy under the Obama administration, and in particular the emphasis on cooperative engagement in sustaining a liberal international order, reflected a 'post-American world' scenario, in which the diffusion of power and the 'rise of the rest' were ending an era of unipolar American primacy, and where relative decline would mean that the United States was still the most influential, but no longer the sole dominant power in the international system.¹⁶

The White House and the Pentagon also responded to this development by recalibrating and downsizing America's geostrategic level of ambition. While the 2012 *Defense Strategic Guidance* rebalanced the U.S. military to the Asia-Pacific, it also officially reformulated, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, the standard measure for the global power projection capability of the United States. This had been defined as the ability to fight two major regional conflicts (MRCs) simultaneously. Instead, the standard was reduced to the ability to fight one major war and act defensively against the aggressive aspirations of another actor in a second conflict.¹⁷ In addition, U.S. forces would 'no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations.'¹⁸ Under Obama, the United States pursued a grand strategy of 'hegemony light.'

In his opening remarks to the *Defense Strategic Guidance* document, President Obama also referred to the Budget Control Act of 2011, and the need to reduce defense spending, in order to 'renew our long-term economic strength.'¹⁹ The strategy review leading up to the DSG was initiated in April 2011, in order to identify \$400 billion in additional savings in the defense budget as part of a broader effort to achieve \$4 trillion in deficit reduction over 12 years.²⁰ With the Budget Control Act of 2011 and the onset of sequestration in 2013 the Pentagon would ultimately face a reduction in previously planned defense spending levels of

about \$1 trillion over ten years, compared to original estimates. While the United States would maintain by far the largest single defense budget in the world, sequestration was another signifier that American primacy would be less pronounced than in the immediate post-Cold War and 9/11-era.

As Obama explained in context with the new *National Security Strategy* (NSS) of 2015: “(...) the challenges we face require strategic patience and persistence.”²¹ Beyond an assessment of threats and a calculation of resources however, an American grand strategy also functions as articulation of a national vision by the political leadership, which defines America’s role in the world. Here, the Obama administration has laid an emphasis on the limitations of American power, and the virtues of restraint, rather than on remaking the world in America’s image. The 2015 *National Security Strategy* again revealed this tension between contradictory impulses. While the document described America’s global leadership role as ‘indispensable,’ it also stated that American resources and influence were ‘not infinite’ and that the United States should not ‘attempt to dictate the trajectory of all unfolding events around the world.’²² Although, according to the NSS, ‘American exceptionalism’ remained a reality, due to the country’s unique economic and military superiority, and liberal value system, the United States should lead first and foremost through its allies and partners, and

consider military power only one of many tools at its disposable, and not necessarily always the most effective one.²³ As President Obama explained in May 2014, discussing the use of military power by the United States during a speech at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point: “Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail.”²⁴ Under Obama, American grand strategy attempted to bridge contradictory impulses, seeking to maintain the country’s global leadership position and to pursue a commensurate national security agenda, while practicing limited engagement and hegemonic restraint. The ‘pivot to Asia’ has operated within these conflicted parameters of U.S. foreign and security policy the Obama administration has set.

The Pivot between Engagement and Containment

In September 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced ‘America’s Pacific Century’ with great enthusiasm in an article for *Foreign Policy*, declaring that: “(...) there should be no doubt that America has the capacity to secure and sustain our global leadership in this century as we did in the last.”²⁵ The ‘pivot to Asia’ was framed as a geopolitical refocusing, - a substantially increased investment of the United States, diplomatically, militarily, and economically in the Asia-Pacific. As a grand strategy, it was designed to

secure America's lasting engagement with the region as a 'Pacific power,' and reinvigorate the country's global leadership position, which seemed in decline since the financial crisis of 2008 and U.S. setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan. During his speech to the Australian Parliament on 17 November 2011 President Obama clearly outlined the pivot as geopolitical transition of America's strategic priorities from the post-9/11 environment towards a Pacific future: "As we end today's wars, I have directed my national security team to make our presence and mission in the Asia Pacific a top priority."²⁶ In the more than four years since this geostrategic shift has been announced however, major U.S. think tanks, prominent media commentators, Congressional reports, and even senior military and civilian Pentagon officials have all questioned the credibility of the pivot, or wondered if it ever took place in the first place.²⁷ This raises the question, if the pivot strategy has actually functioned as a coherent and consistent link between stated objectives, invested means, and the ways envisioned to produce desired outcomes.

The key goals of the pivot, later renamed rebalancing to dispel fears about U.S. withdrawal from Europe and elsewhere, follow from the general aim of American grand strategy to sustain the leadership position of the United States within a liberal international order. According to then National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon, the overarching objective of

the United States in the Asia-Pacific region was ‘a stable security environment and a regional order rooted in economic openness, peaceful resolution of disputes, and respect for universal rights and freedoms’.²⁸ In order to achieve this outcome, the Obama administration aimed to implement a ‘a comprehensive, multidimensional strategy,’ focused on five key areas: the strengthening of existing alliances; deepening partnerships with emerging powers; development of a stable, constructive relationship with China; the empowering of regional institutions; and helping to build a regional economic architecture to sustain shared prosperity.²⁹

The diplomatic pivot

Existing alliances that were strengthened since the announcement of the pivot include U.S. relations with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand.³⁰ In August 2014, the United States and Australia concluded a 25-year agreement to station around 2,500 U.S. Marines in Darwin on a rotational basis. The United States and the Philippines executed an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) allowing the U.S. to conduct operations and temporarily station troops on Philippine territory after a 25-year absence from the country. The United States also demonstrated its renewed focus on the region by further integrating itself in its institutional architecture, becoming a formal member of the East Asia

Summit in 2011, and elevating the relationship with ASEAN, appointing the first U.S. resident ambassador to the organization the same year.³¹ This process continued with institutionalization of the annual U.S.-ASEAN Leaders Summits, and the conclusion of a ‘strategic partnership’ agreement in November 2015.

Passively hedging against the growing influence of China, while avoiding direct confrontation, was one of the prime motives for many South and East Asian nations to further develop cooperation with the U.S., both economically and militarily, in particular in light of growing Chinese assertiveness in the East and South China Sea. For the United States, institutional involvement in the Asia-Pacific also meant the use of collective bodies to counter China more actively. This discrepancy was partially illustrated by the failure of the United States to include a specific mentioning of China in a joint statement on peace, security and stability in the region following the U.S.-ASEAN summit in February 2016 in California, the first ever to take place on U.S. soil.³²

A key focus of the pivot has been the strengthening of the U.S.-Japan alliance. In July 2013, Japan became a fully-fledged participant in the TPP negotiations. The United States could also resolve a long-standing dispute with the Japanese government over the stationing of

American troops on Okinawa, although relocation of the Futenma Air Base continues to meet with resistance by the local government in Okinawa. On the Japanese side, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has undertaken a series of steps to raise Japan's national security profile, and to cooperate more closely with the United States.³³ This has included establishment of a National Security Council (NSC) and the publication of the country's first ever National Security Strategy (NSS) in December 2013, which made strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance a key strategic priority. Improving jointness and interoperability with U.S. forces were also key components in the 2013 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), which singled out the 'rapid expansion and intensification of Chinese activities on the sea and in the air' as major challenge Japan faced in the evolving security environment in the Asia-Pacific.³⁴

Highly significantly in this context was also the Abe government's reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution to allow for collective self-defense. This would provide the legal framework for the Japanese Self Defense Force (JSDF) to act in direct defense and support of the U.S. as the country's main ally.³⁵ Japan's strategic focus on strengthening its security partnership with the United States documented exemplary how the 'pivot to Asia' also reflected a clear demand of several key U.S. allies and partners for an increased

engagement of the United States. This alliance dynamic in the security realm however, in turn challenged the potential for strategic engagement with China as part of the rebalancing strategy.

In recent years, the United States has become increasingly involved in territorial disputes of several of its allies and partners with China in the East and South China Sea, where jurisdiction and sovereignty over several territories and surrounding waters remains disputed. China has engaged in a series of military and paramilitary show-of-force demonstrations, advanced land reclamation activities, and dispatched troops to military outposts to bolster its territorial claims to various islands, which promise access to significant natural gas and oil resources, possess rich fishing grounds, and are strategically located close to important commercial shipping routes.³⁶ As the U.S. Department of Defense has noted in its *Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy*, released in 2015, while other claimants have created military outposts and reclaimed land on disputed features in the South China Sea, China's activities differed from previous such efforts both in scope and effect, 'unilaterally altering the physical status quo in the region'.³⁷

President Obama did stress U.S. support for Japan in the ongoing conflict over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands during a joint press conference with Premier Abe in April 2014: “(...) let me reiterate that our treaty commitment to Japan’s security is absolute, and Article 5 covers all territories under Japan’s administration, including the Senkaku Islands.”³⁸ Before the background of Chinese land reclamation activities and incursions into Philippine territorial waters, in particular around the Spratly Islands and the Scarborough Shoal, Obama declared that the American commitment to defend the Philippines was ‘ironclad.’³⁹ In December 2015, Beijing filed a sharp diplomatic protest after an American B-52 bomber flew within two nautical miles of a Chinese-built island in the Spratlys, illustrating the potential for heightened tension between the two powers resulting from territorial disputes and military posturing in the region.⁴⁰ A statement by the G-7 foreign ministers in April 2016 expressing ‘strong opposition to any intimidating, coercive or provocative unilateral actions that could alter the status quo and increase tensions,’ was strongly rebuked by China.⁴¹

While officially, the U.S. government is taking no side in the disputes involving China, Taiwan, Brunei, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Japan, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter has made it clear that the United States military would not accept Chinese attempts to curtail its freedom of movement within the region, declaring that: “The United States will fly,

sail, and operate wherever international law allows, [...] and the South China Sea is not and will not be an exception.”⁴² The United States Navy has subsequently conducted a number of ‘freedom of navigation’ exercises, flying planes and sailing ships near disputed islands to underscore its right to move freely within the region. Should a confrontation between China and Japan or the Philippines escalate into violent conflict, the United States would be obligated to consider military action against China under its current treaty obligations.

In addition to strengthening existing alliances and increasing its institutional involvement, the United States has also focused on developing ‘strategic partnerships’ with several countries in the region, including Myanmar (Burma), Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and India, resulting in regular diplomatic consultations and joint military exercises, and in the case of Singapore rotational naval deployments.⁴³ Of particular importance has been the emerging strategic partnership between the United States and India. President Obama’s visit to India in January 2015 provided the occasion to renew a 10-year defense pact between the two countries, allowing the transfer of American armaments technology to India, the joint development and co-production of defense products in India, and collaboration on counterterrorism, security and regional stability.⁴⁴ India already conducts more joint military

exercises with the United States than with any other country and defense sales increased to \$9 billion in 2014, resulting in the United States displacing Russia as India's biggest supplier.⁴⁵

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's traditional strategic stance of 'non-alignment' seems to have given way toward a closer cooperation with the United States in the face of multiple security threats, and above all the rise of China. Given ongoing border disputes between the two countries and Chinese military incursions into Indian territory in the Himalayas in 2014, closer U.S. engagement with India however, is again likely to increase rather than defuse Chinese concerns about American containment and the impetus behind the entire rebalancing strategy. Deepening economic engagement between Washington and Beijing could help to offset fears of diplomatic and military encirclement, but so far the pivot has rather excluded than integrated China in this regard.

The economic pivot

The share of global GDP (measured in purchasing power parity terms), by the Asia-Pacific region has increased from under 30% in 2000 to about 40% in 2014, while North America's share of global GDP has declined in the same period by 6% to 20.2%.⁴⁶ If current trends continue, the global economic weight of the Asia-Pacific will continue to increase, even with

a predicted slowdown in the Chinese economy to less than double-digit growth rates. This dramatic shift marks the vital strategic and economic importance of the region for American grand strategy. Obama's rebalancing responded to this geo-economic development by taking the lead in the negotiations for a Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement (TPP) that were successfully concluded in October 2015.

If subsequently ratified by all partner nations (Australia, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, United States, Vietnam, Chile, Brunei, Singapore, New Zealand), TPP would create the world's largest regional trading bloc, edging out the European Union and NAFTA, with a combined population of 800 million people, accounting for almost 40% of global economic output. In 2014, the United States already recorded \$727 billion worth of exports to TPP markets, which amounted to 45% of all U.S. exports.⁴⁷ Besides further reducing tariffs and eliminating trade barriers however, TPP would also establish regulatory directives for the protection of intellectual property, liberalize investments, set labor and environmental standards, and guarantee equal treatment of state-run enterprises.⁴⁸ The agreement signaled the Obama administration's determination for a continued American leadership role in shaping the rules of the global economy, as well as for its enduring hegemonic role in Asia.

China, the world's second largest economy and the largest economy in Asia has not been part of the TPP negotiations, fueling in turn fears in Beijing that TPP was from the beginning designed as an anti-China initiative. Such fears were compounded by press reports that referred to TPP as 'anyone but China;' while President Obama declared: "(...) we've got to make sure we're writing the trade rules in the fastest-growing region of the world, the Asia-Pacific, as opposed to having China write those rules for us."⁴⁹

Underlying the original grand strategic rationale behind TPP was, despite Washington's assurances to the contrary, an attempt to reverse the perception of relative but steady decline of the United States and its economic fortunes mirrored by the inexorable rise of China to economic and subsequent geopolitical supremacy in Asia. In a 2015 report for the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) think tank, authors Robert Blackwill and Ashley Tellis linked closer economic integration with the TPP partner nations to a new grand strategy toward China that centered on 'balancing the rise of Chinese power rather than continuing to assist its ascendancy.'⁵⁰

The problem for the U.S. however, is that TPP, whose economic significance essentially rests on the combined economic weight of America and Japan, faces the growing dominance of

Asian-Pacific trade by China, who is already the largest respective trading partner for several TPP countries, including Australia, Japan, Vietnam, New Zealand, and the United States itself.⁵¹ Some Chinese government officials in turn see TPP membership as an opportunity for China to further advance its own economic and state sector reforms.⁵² According to the Chinese economist Yiping Huang, ‘an increasing number of policy advisers’ was urging the government to apply to join the TPP negotiations ‘as early as possible.’⁵³ A 2014 study estimated that China, if it were to join TPP, could expect economic gains of \$809 billion by 2025. Staying outside the agreement would instead cost over \$35 billion annually.⁵⁴

For China, joining TPP would mean, among other things, to further liberalize investments and markets currently under state-control, to end preferential treatment for state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and acceptance of the transnational investor-state dispute mechanism. Reforms compatible with such measures are being advocated, for example, by Zhou Xiaochuan, governor of the People’s Bank of China, but go beyond the limits currently set by the State Council and the Communist Party of China (CPC).⁵⁵

Meanwhile, China has engaged in a number of economic counter-initiatives intended to set up free-trade arrangements in Asia that would in turn exclude the United States. The China-

led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations, for example, less ambitious in scope and in setting regularity standards than TPP, were launched in November 2012 at the ASEAN Summit in Cambodia. RCEP proposes a free trade agreement between the member states of ASEAN and six states with which ASEAN has existing free-trade agreements in place (Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand). Negotiations are expected to be concluded in 2016, creating a regional trading bloc, which represents about half of the world's population and over 30 percent of global GDP, reaching a combined economic output of US\$ 23 trillion in 2015.⁵⁶ In addition, China has been in negotiations about a free-trade arrangement with Japan and South Korea since 2012.

China's President Xi Jinping has also launched an ambitious effort to construct a 'New Silk Road', officially known as the 'One Belt One Road' initiative (OBOR), designed to create a transcontinental economic development zone and integrated logistics and infrastructure network, connecting China via land and maritime routes to Central and South Asia, Africa and Europe.⁵⁷ Beyond a focus on exports and infrastructure China seeks to use the OBOR initiative to enhance policy coordination across the Asian continent, further financial integration, and liberalize trade.⁵⁸ The scope and significance of the OBOR project have been

compared to America's post-World War II Marshall plan, while some observers have labeled it 'China's Eurasian Pivot.'⁵⁹

Given geo-economic forecasts about the future centrality of the Asia-Pacific region for the world economy and China's evolving economic position as key actor within that region, any U.S. economic strategy set to ignore or sideline China seems likely to be unsuccessful, in particular since most countries in the region will aim to maintain close economic ties with both Washington and Beijing. As Henry Kissinger has noted, most Asian countries 'invite an American role in the region but seek equilibrium, not a crusade or confrontation.'⁶⁰

Pursuing the inclusion of China into the TPP framework would therefore allow the United States to re-emphasize strategic engagement with the People's Republic as part of the rebalancing, and help dispel Chinese fears of containment, at least partially. Kurt Campbell, who as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia was one of the original architects of the pivot, has repeatedly stressed that the strategy was a comprehensive approach for cooperative engagement in the Asia-Pacific, including with China, and that it should not be reduced to its military dimension, either by observers in the United States, or in the region itself.⁶¹ As Susan Rice made clear in a speech in November 2013, the door for Beijing remained open:

‘We welcome any nation that is willing to live up to the high-standards of this agreement to join and share in the benefits of the TPP, and that includes China.’⁶² Furthering regional economic integration is in China’s national interest. In 2014, China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi explained that: “China will face the member states of the TPP talks with an open attitude, as well as other regional or cross-region FTA initiatives.” Vice-Finance Minister Zhu Guangyao stated in Washington that TPP would be ‘incomplete’ in the long-term without China.⁶³

Should China’s integration into TPP prove to be too difficult for both sides, the United States could consider an alternative ‘hybrid’ approach that would link the TPP and RCEP agreements. A Free Trade Area for the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) could establish a middle ground between the high regulatory standards favored by Washington, and the lower level focus on trade liberalization pursued by Beijing.⁶⁴ China has strongly emphasized FTAAP during the 2014 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, and the 2015 APEC summit Leaders Declaration reconfirmed that ‘FTAAP should be pursued as a comprehensive free trade agreement by building on ongoing regional undertakings’, singling out both TPP and RCEP.⁶⁵

Such a regional cooperative approach would also complement negotiations currently underway for a comprehensive bilateral investment treaty (BIT) between the United States and China, which were reaffirmed as ‘top economic priority’ by President Obama and Xi during the latter’s state visit to the United States in September 2015.⁶⁶ Such cooperative measures could readdress the balance between economic engagement and counter-balancing in America’s China policy, which critics have argued has tilted heavily towards military containment since Obama’s announcement of the pivot.⁶⁷

The military pivot

Its diplomatic and economic initiatives notwithstanding, the most visible component of America’s rebalancing and engagement strategy, and the one that has received the greatest public and scholarly attention, has been the military aspect.⁶⁸ One of the key results of the pivot was that, as announced in the 2012 DSG, from 2020 onwards, the U.S. Navy would have 60% of its forces stationed in the Pacific, compared to a previous rough parity of forces between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Of 11 active aircraft carrier strike groups, America’s principle tool for the global projection of military power, six would be committed to the region. United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) would also be prioritized in terms of getting access to the most advanced military technologies and new equipment in the

American arsenal.⁶⁹ Joint military exercises and maneuvers with several partners and U.S. allies were increased in size, scope and frequency since the announcement of the pivot.⁷⁰

While the 2016 U.S. defense budget of \$573 billion still dwarves China's official budget, at about \$150 billion, the latter has become the second largest spender on defense in the world, acquiring sophisticated military technologies in the process. These acquisitions, from anti-ship ballistic missiles, like the DF-21, dubbed 'carrier killer' in the West, to cyber warfare technologies could challenge U.S. primacy and coerce smaller nations in the region.⁷¹

In response to this development, leading American think tanks working on national security, foreign policy and grand strategy, like CNAS, co-founded by Kurt Campbell, or the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), have been strongly supportive of the pivot, and have subsequently demanded an increase in funds and the addition of further military assets to credibly underwrite the strategy, aimed both at deterring China and maintaining U.S. hegemony.⁷² A widely noted 2016 CSIS report on the future of the Asia-Pacific rebalance demanded that the United States should 'sustain and expand U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific', and fund defense at higher levels, beyond sequestration imposed limits.⁷³

Precisely this link between the security dimension of the rebalancing and the aim to secure American primacy in the Asia-Pacific however, led critics of the pivot to argue against such an increase of U.S. military engagement. Robert Ross, Professor of Political Science at Boston College, for example, proposed that the United States should instead disengage from maritime disputes, and scale back its military presence on China's land borders, in order to reduce the growing security dilemma in the region.⁷⁴ Hugh White, Professor of Strategic Studies at the Australian National University contended that the foundation for a new Asian order could neither lie in American, nor in Chinese hegemony.⁷⁵

Yet, securing American hegemony remains the overall goal of the rebalancing. Then Combatant Commander of USPACOM, U.S. Navy Admiral Samuel J. Locklear III clearly lined out the military rationale behind the pivot in 2013, as aimed at an Asia-Pacific region that was 'secure and prosperous, underpinned by U.S. leadership and a rules-based international order.'⁷⁶ His successor, Admiral Harry Harris directly accused China of seeking outright hegemony in East Asia by 'militarizing the South China Sea' during a Senate Armed Service Committee hearing in February 2016, referring to Chinese actions like the stationing of surface-to-air and anti-ship cruise missiles on one of its military outpost in the Paracel islands.⁷⁷

China, in turn has accused the United States of its own form of militarization, citing its increased naval operations and new basing arrangements. Following the Joint Statement of the 2016 U.S.-ASEAN Special Leaders' Summit, which problematized the situation in the South China Sea, Hong Lei, spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, responded that: "Relevant countries from outside the region should not flex their military muscles in the South China Sea and should not entice regional countries to carry out joint military exercises or patrol activities targeting a third party."⁷⁸ Both rhetorically and practically, the military dimension of the pivot has increased the hegemonic competition between the United States and China for primacy in Asia.

The American military and the U.S. national security apparatus clearly see China's growing military power, and in particular its anti-access and area denial capabilities (A2/AD) as strategic challenge to U.S. interests, and potential threat to American hegemony.⁷⁹ The 2011 *National Military Strategy of the United States of America*, for example, officially stated America's intent to 'oppose any nation's actions that jeopardize access to and use of the global commons and cyberspace, or that threaten the security of our allies.'⁸⁰ Subsequently, the Pentagon and national security think tanks, like the Center for Strategic and Budgetary

Assessments (CSBA) developed the Air-Sea Battle (ASB) concept, which envisioned the ‘ability to conduct operational maneuver from strategic distances—that is, the ability to project dominant military force across transoceanic ranges’.⁸¹ In practical terms, the U.S. military has drawn up several scenarios to counter China’s A2/AD capabilities: ranging from drones and cyber warfare; to long-range strikes against Chinese strategic and military targets; and a naval blockade targeting the Chinese economy.⁸²

While American officials have repeatedly stressed that the pivot is not designed to contain China, the military element of the rebalancing, as documented in Air-Sea Battle or the U.S. Navy’s ‘freedom of navigation’ exercises, is clearly focused on deterring the People’s Republic and maintaining America’s traditional position of military preeminence. As a senior U.S. Navy official has remarked: “We want to put enough uncertainty in the minds of Chinese military planners that they would not want to take us on. [...] Air-Sea Battle is all about convincing the Chinese that we will win this competition.”⁸³ Yet, specifically defining and resourcing Air-Sea Battle, or its currently developed successor, the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC), as a full military containment strategy of China would at the same time jeopardize ongoing efforts of the Obama administration to seek engagement and an improved cooperative relationship with the

People's Republic. As President Obama has remarked in February 2012: "I have always emphasized that we welcome China's peaceful rise that we believe that a strong and prosperous China is one that can help to bring stability at prosperity to the region and to the world."⁸⁴

The main challenge for American grand strategy and the future of the rebalancing is, if the United States can simultaneously pursue a cooperative engagement with China, while further strengthening and expanding its system of political, military and economic alliances and partnerships. The development so far suggests, that this amounts to a squaring of the circle, exposing a fundamental contradiction at the heart of the rebalancing. Some observers in the United States, such as the libertarian Cato Institute think tank, or realist International Relations scholars like Ross or Stephen Walt have suggested that the U.S. should resolve this contradiction by switching to a comprehensive strategy of offshore balancing.⁸⁵

This would imply a wholesale reduction of U.S. ground troops in Japan and South Korea, a further relocation to offshore bases and installations, such as Guam and Diego Garcia, and a strengthening of the independent defense capabilities of U.S. allies, while reducing the risk of direct U.S.-Chinese confrontation in the region. Such a radical departure from the basic

premise of American grand strategy however is highly unlikely, as it would negate on long-standing U.S. alliance commitments, question America's global leadership role, and counter-act the thrust of the pivot, which sought more American engagement in the Asia-Pacific, not less.

In terms of engaging China, this has left the United States with attempts to further improve military-to-military relations with the People's Republic, for example, via the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA), or the establishment of new joint mechanisms, such as the Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters initiative and the Notification of Major Military Activities initiative.⁸⁶ These efforts, however, have had only a limited effect in dampening tensions, resulting from the geostrategic competition between the two powers.

The United States should therefore explore new forms of cooperative security in the region.⁸⁷

While the fundamental dilemma resulting from competing hegemonic ambitions of the United States and China is unlikely to be fully resolved, a joint, institutionalized forum for confidence building and mutual consultation, akin to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) could help to ameliorate tensions arising from both China's

rise and America's rebalancing. The Asian Maritime Organization for Security and Cooperation (AMOSC) initiative by the Japanese Institute for International Policy Studies (IIPS), for example, seeks to improve cooperative security in the Asia-Pacific by including both China and the United States in such a new regional security framework.⁸⁸

China and the pivot

In China itself, America's diplomatic, economic and military actions, despite repeated U.S. assurances to the contrary, have been increasingly viewed as policy of containment and threat to its own security interests. A 2013 Chinese White Paper on defense, for example, accused the United States of exacerbating tensions in the Asia-Pacific, declaring that: "There are some countries, which are strengthening their Asia Pacific military alliances, expanding their military presence in the region and frequently make the situation there tenser."⁸⁹ U.S. efforts to improve engagement with China in the security realm, such as inviting China for the first time to the annual RIMPAC naval exercise in 2014, have done little to discourage Chinese threat perceptions. A point that was well illustrated, when China dispatched a *Dongdiao*-class auxiliary general intelligence ship to spy on the very RIMPAC proceedings it participated in.⁹⁰

Ultimately, the American vision of an Asia-Pacific continuing under *Pax Americana*, albeit with greater ‘burden-sharing’ is one that China does not share. From a Chinese perspective, the increase of U.S. military assets and development of operational concepts against A2/AD capabilities, - whether called Air-Sea Battle or JAM-GC-, the strengthening of America’s strategic partnerships and alliances with countries, which oppose China’s territorial claims, and the development of TPP under exclusion of China all seemed designed to counter the rise of the country into its ‘natural’ and historic position as the region’s hegemon. As a result of these competing strategic visions of hegemony in Asia, China has developed alternative security and economic arrangements that in turn exclude the United States, rather than becoming a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in the eyes of Washington.

When Robert Zoellick, then Deputy Secretary of State, coined the term in a speech in 2005, he urged China to ‘sustain the international system’ that had ‘enabled its success.’⁹¹ According to Zoellick this would mean further political and economic liberalization at home and greater diplomatic engagement abroad, from combating international terrorism to halting the spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). In other words, the United States sought to further integrate China into a liberal, international system of rules and norms it itself had created, and which it continued to be at the center of. Urging China to become a ‘responsible

stakeholder’ subsequently became a commonplace of American and Western rhetoric, expressing the firmly held belief that the People’s Republic would ultimately not seek, nor want to seek a change of status quo, either globally or in the Asia-Pacific, and instead become more Western in its behavior and character. In recent years however, China has clearly indicated that it would seek to establish political, economic and institutional arrangements that could side-line the United States and circumvent a Western-led system, instead advancing its own version of an ‘Asia-Pacific Dream.’ This regional strategic concept was envisioned to work alongside the ‘Chinese Dream’ advocated by Xi Jinping, aimed at the further modernization and revitalization of the Chinese state, economy and society.⁹²

As the Chinese President declared in a speech in May 2014 in Shanghai, the ‘Asia-Pacific Dream’ should involve a new security concept for the region: “In the final analysis, it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia.”⁹³ To this effect, Xi proposed to enhance the capacity and institutional building of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), and to explore the establishment of a regional architecture for cooperative security. China would also underwrite the economic dimension of the ‘Asia-Pacific dream’ with establishment of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and by committing US\$40

billion to a new Silk Road Fund, intended to provide investment and financing support in infrastructure, resources development and industrial cooperation.⁹⁴ In addition, China's involvement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or the BRICS countries further underlined its ambition to take a leading role and move outside the U.S.-led system.

Chinese behavior in the South and East China Sea has also become rather more than less assertive since the announcement of the pivot.⁹⁵ In March 2014, boats of the Chinese coast guard blocked access to a Philippine outpost on the Spratly Islands. In May of the same year, China installed an oilrig inside Vietnam's exclusive economic zone and clashed with Vietnamese fishing boats there. Similar incidents have been occurring regularly between Chinese and Japanese fishing and coast guard vessels around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands since 2010. One of the most significant moves indicating China's growing territorial ambitions was the Chinese declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the islands in November 2013. Washington reacted by sending two B-52 bombers through the zone, clearly stating that it did not recognize the Chinese claim, yet advised civilian airlines to observe it nonetheless. China has also begun construction of a military base on the island of Nanji, located about 300 kilometers from the Senkakus/Diaoyus.

The conflict between America's vision of a 'Pacific Century' the pivot was to initiate and the 'Asia-Pacific Dream' put forward by China under Xi appears as contest between two different and seemingly incompatible versions of hegemony. On the one side, stands the traditional role of the United States, who sees itself as self-interested but benign guarantor of an open system of liberal democracy and free trade, underwritten by American political values, its economic clout and military power. On the other, stands the Chinese claim to preponderance in the Asia-Pacific, based on the country's rising economic and military profile and its historic preeminence, with Chinese civilization as the ancient political, economic and cultural center of gravity for the region.

This geopolitical competition over economic and military leadership in the region has increasingly been affecting U.S.-China relations. While China, for example, enlisted twenty-one countries to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank it promised to provide with half of the initial US\$ 50 billion start-up capital, Washington engaged in diplomatic lobbying against the Chinese initiative.⁹⁶ As a *BBC* comment put it, by signing up to the AIIB, key U.S. allies like the UK, Germany and Australia were 'effectively endorsing Beijing's effort to establish financial rivals to the Bretton Woods institutions, [...] which are dominated by America.'⁹⁷

At the same time, President Xi Jinping has proposed to build a ‘new type of major-country relationship’ with the United States, which ultimately called on the two countries to recognize each other as equal great powers, and would essentially demand that the U.S. accept China as Asia’s leading power and de facto hegemon. At the informal US-China summit in California in June 2013, Xi put forward the concept, mentioning three foundational principles: no conflict and no confrontation; mutual respect, including for both countries’ ‘core interests’ and major concerns; and a win-win cooperation.⁹⁸ The concept of China’s ‘core interests’ remains one of the greatest obstacles standing in the way of a rapprochement of the two countries, since China regards its ‘national sovereignty and territorial integrity’ as the one of its key strategic objectives.⁹⁹ Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity does not only include reunification with Taiwan on PRC terms, but also China’s disputed territorial claims and assertion within the ‘first island chain.’

In a Chinese language press briefing of the Xi-Obama meeting, a spokesperson for the Chinese foreign ministry stated that the Diaoyu Islands involved China’s ‘sovereignty and territorial integrity’ and therefore China’s ‘core interest’.¹⁰⁰ Although this statement was later deleted from the English-language transcript, the episode seemed to confirm American and

Western strategic assessments of Chinese behavior as aimed at achieving dominance within the ‘first island chain.’ Chinese documents refer to this area, which encompasses the majority of the South China Sea, as the ‘9-dash-line’, based on historic maps submitted by China to the United Nations in support of its territorial claims.¹⁰¹ According to American estimates of rising Chinese military capabilities, including the presence of by then multiple Chinese aircraft carrier strike groups, the South China Sea would ‘virtually be a Chinese lake’ by 2025.¹⁰² To date however, China has not officially clarified the meaning of the ‘9-dash-line,’ or articulated its legal basis, further complicating U.S.-China relations.

While the United States and China continue to disagree over territorial issues, the Obama administration has also taken steps to not let the situation escalate into open confrontation. According to a *Navy Times* article from April 2016 National Security Adviser Rice ordered U.S. military leaders like Admiral Harris to tone down their rhetoric vis-à-vis China over the South China Sea dispute.¹⁰³ President Xi’s first state visit to Washington in September 2015 similarly indicated a renewed emphasis on engagement. Both countries confirmed their partnership on issues like Afghanistan, climate change, or UN peacekeeping, and strengthened cooperation on cyber security, agreeing not to ‘conduct or knowingly support cyber-enabled theft of intellectual property’.¹⁰⁴ Both sides also created a high-level joint

dialogue mechanism on cybercrime and related issues.¹⁰⁵ This was a sign of progress, since the United States had repeatedly accused China of sponsoring cyber espionage, including with the high-profile data theft at the Office of Personnel Management in June 2015.

Yet, the state visit also revealed the enduring competing strategic and geopolitical aspirations of the two powers. While the Chinese Foreign Ministry, for example, listed agreement to ‘continue the endeavor to build a new model of major-country relationship between China and the United States’ as top outcome of the state visit, the White House equivalent lacked any reference to this point.¹⁰⁶ Some prominent American strategists and long-time observers of U.S.-China relations however, like Kissinger or Zbigniew Brzezinski have advocated similar approaches to the ‘new type’ model, which would stress cooperative partnership on a basis of equality, mutual respect and joint interests, rather than the attempted integration of China into a U.S.-led order.¹⁰⁷ Here, the United States could, for example, consider giving up its resistance against the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, where it expressed concerns over ‘governance, environmental and social safeguards’, and join the Chinese-led organization.¹⁰⁸ As with combining TPP and RCEP, or a new cooperative security architecture however, such an emphasis of engagement with China would imply that the

United States could accept a hegemonic co-habitation for the Asia-Pacific, rather than the mere perpetuation of American primacy in the region.

Rebalancing with restraint: Sequestration, domestic politics and America's enduring global commitments

This fundamental conceptual problem of the pivot that faces both a prospective partner and potential rival in China is compounded by the limited means and political ambiguity with which the rebalancing is underwritten both economically and militarily. Sequestration and Washington's cautious response to the advance of ISIS and the Russian annexation of Crimea seem to have questioned the ultimate credibility of American security commitments with key allies in the region.¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, the on-going political gridlock and partisan polarization that resulted in sequestration, is raising fundamental questions about the problem-solving capacity of the political class in Washington. Ernest Bower, a senior analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, has commented how the protracted struggle to obtain presidential fast-track authority in Congress negatively impacted America's image in Asia: "American partners, particularly in Southeast Asia, are really worried about a narrative they see in Beijing -- that is, the Chinese see weakness in Washington right now."¹¹⁰

Since its inception the United States' rebalancing has been measured against America's fiscal difficulties and ongoing cuts to the defense budget. As a result of sequestration, the strength of the active-duty U.S. Army was reduced from 570,000 to 475,000 troops, supposed to reach an end-strength of 450,000 in 2018. The U.S. Marine Corps would shift from 202,000 troops in 2012 to 182,000 troops in 2017. The U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force received fewer new ships and aircraft than originally demanded, while training exercises were curtailed or cancelled. Should sequestration levels stay in place after 2017, the numbers of the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps are scheduled to drop even further, to levels of 420,000 and 175,000 respectively, together with the retirement of an air craft carrier, and further cuts to the numbers of U.S. ships and airplanes.¹¹¹ During his Senate confirmation process as PACOM commander Admiral Harris explained that: "Continued reductions to meet sequestration-mandated resource levels will diminish our military's size, reach, and margin of technological superiority."¹¹²

The Obama administration has always opposed sequestration and continued to adhere to the central tenets of American exceptionalism, global leadership and military preeminence as documented in the 2015 *National Security Strategy* and other key strategy documents. At the

same time, the practice of U.S. defense policy needed to be reconciled with concern for the sustainability of the United States' fiscal situation. The result was a contradiction between grand strategy rhetoric and practice that negatively affected the Asian pivot. According to Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, if not repealed by Congress, sequestration would ultimately force 'significant changes to the U.S. military's global posture and strategy.'¹¹³ In March 2014, Katrina McFarland, assistant secretary of defense for acquisition in the Pentagon was quoted as saying: "Right now, the pivot is being looked at again, because candidly it can't happen".¹¹⁴

While a two-year budget deal was reached in 2015, increasing the DOD base budget for fiscal year 2016 from sequestration levels of \$498 billion to \$522 billion, sequestration is scheduled to remain in place for 2018 and beyond.¹¹⁵ The Congressionally mandated and Pentagon-commissioned *Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025* study by CSIS concluded that cuts to the defense budget from 2009-2015 had already limited the Pentagon's ability to pursue the rebalance, and that long-term budget uncertainty was creating a difficult environment for the future of the strategy.¹¹⁶

In addition, the report found that despite issuing a series of speeches and statement there was no clear, coherent and consistent strategy for the rebalancing in place, leading to confusion within the U.S. government and among America's allies over its intention and implementation.¹¹⁷ While the United States military is expected to maintain a qualitative edge over its Chinese counterpart, the enacted cuts to the Pentagon budget and negative public reactions by political and military officials on its effects challenged the key narrative of the rebalancing as securing America's long-term position in the 'Pacific Century'.

How American politics and the fiscal situation of the United States could negatively impact the credibility of the pivot was illustrated in October 2013, when President Obama had to cancel a high-profile trip to Asia, including his participation in the APEC summit and the East Asia Summit, due to the temporary government shutdown in Washington.¹¹⁸ The negative influence of domestic politics on the rebalancing could also extend to ratification of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, given a rise of protectionist sentiment in the U.S. in the 2016 presidential campaign. This has already resulted in Hillary Clinton, one of the original architects of the pivot, and the Democratic Party's likely presidential candidate, to withdraw her support for TPP.¹¹⁹

The recent crises in Syria, Iraq and Ukraine, and a renewed focus of the Obama administration on the Middle East and Europe, have further added to this credibility problem of the pivot. Under President Obama, the United States has reduced its geopolitical level of ambition and is more reluctant to act as the world's policeman. Events like the rise of ISIS and the annexation of Crimea however, have questioned the ability of America to pull out from its global security responsibilities, and to strategically prioritize one particular region at the expense of other areas.¹²⁰ Since transition to a more cost-effective grand strategy of offshore balancing either globally, or in the Asia-Pacific seems highly unlikely, this makes it

imperative for the United States to seek continued engagement with China in order to reduce the potential for future conflict. At the same time, Washington will need to reassure U.S. allies that its global commitments and domestic challenges do not endanger the rebalancing. This would likely have to involve a further increase of financial and military resources, beyond levels proposed by sequestration.

Conclusion

The 'pivot to Asia' is testament to a strategic dilemma between primacy, cooperative engagement and restraint prevalent in US foreign and security policy under the Obama administration. This contradiction has significant implications for U.S.-China relations, the development of U.S. relations with its Asian allies, and the domestic planning of grand strategy. The attempt to maintain and strengthen America's leadership position in the Asia-Pacific through a combination of cooperative engagement and strategic restraint is ultimately unlikely to succeed, due to the inconsistencies of that strategy. On the one side, the increased diplomatic, economic, and military cooperation with U.S. allies and partners in the region is fueling fears in Beijing that Washington is trying to contain China and halt its rise. This in turn provokes Chinese counter-measures, risking a growing security dilemma in the region,

resulting from a clash of two competing visions of hegemony and regional preeminence. This struggle for supremacy is already visible in areas such as the ongoing competing free-trade negotiations in Asia, or the various territorial disputes involving China and its neighbors. Yet, the United States is also unable to fully integrate China into a system of economic and security arrangements, essentially designed to prolong America's liberal hegemony, while China seeks to establish its own hegemonic position in the region.

On the other hand, the emphasis on 'strategic patience' and restraint, America's enduring global security commitments, uncertainty about strategic coherence and consistency, and the limitation of fiscal and military resources due to Congressional sequestration are undermining the political credibility of the rebalancing, both at home and abroad. Even if a containment of China was America's strategic intention, the means provided would be unable to achieve this goal. The pivot thus presents an uneasy and ultimately unconvincing strategic compromise between heightened U.S. engagement with the region as a whole, and a soft containment of China within the Asia-Pacific.

While this fundamental strategic dilemma is unlikely to be resolved, the United States should seek to improve cooperative engagement with China in order to ameliorate Beijing's fear of

containment, and to reduce the risk of conflict resulting from competing hegemonic designs. Attempts to include China in the TPP agreement, or linking TPP and RCEP could provide such an opportunity, as would developing a new cooperative framework for maritime security. This however, would require for the United States to move somewhat closer to the model of a 'new type' of great power relationship proposed by China, while rejecting Chinese claims to outright hegemony. At the same time, the United States would have to invest additional resources, in particular in the military realm, in order to sustain the credibility of the rebalancing, and to reassure its allies and partners in the region. Successfully managing this strategic, geopolitical, and economic balancing act will be a key task for President Obama's successor in the White House.

Notes

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